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ABSTRACT

Although the goal of universal literacy in the United States refers specifically to the literacy of adults, significant progress toward the goal is dependent to a great extent upon educational experiences prior to adulthood. Encouraging business involvement in strengthening the connection between school and work acknowledges the interrelationship of a literate adult population and its prior educational experiences. School-to-work transitions of noncollege-bound youth are needed to overcome the disconnection between education and work. During the past decade, business involvement with schools has increased. As a result, progress has been made toward achieving the objective of business involvement in strengthening the connection between education and work. In some communities, business leaders are entering into a new form of collaboration, known as work-education partnerships. Although work-education partnerships vary by their nature, effective partnerships share a number of common elements. Successful partnerships use brokers to develop links among all players, involve the right players, ensure commitment by developing a sense of ownership among the various organizations, develop a formal plan, establish an organization to manage the operation, and cultivate and maintain the partnership. (8 references) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

DIGEST NO. 106

School-to-Work Transition: Its Role in Achieving Universal Literacy

by Susan Imel

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In September 1990, the nation's governors and President Bush met at an education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and agreed to work together to establish a comprehensive set of national educational goals (National Governors' Association 1990). The fifth educational goal developed at the education summit relates to achieving universal literacy in the United States. Ambitiously, the goal states that "by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (ibid., p. 11). In a recent article in the *Kappan*, Larry Mikulecky (1990) outlines why "achieving universal literacy within the decade . . . is probably not possible, even with infinite resources" (p. 306). Nevertheless, Mikulecky is optimistic that progress toward universal literacy can be made.

To reach the goal of universal literacy in the United States, five objectives were established. The first of these objectives--every major U.S. business will be involved in strengthening the connection between education and work--is the focus of this *Digest*. The major topics are (1) the need for effective school-to-work transition and its relationship to the goal, (2) the current status of business involvement in school-to-work transition, and (3) common elements of effective connections between education and work.

Why School-to-Work Transition?

Although the goal of universal literacy in the United States refers specifically to the literacy of **adults**, significant progress toward the goal is dependent to a great extent upon individuals' educational experiences prior to adulthood. Encouraging business involvement in strengthening the connection between school and work acknowledges the interconnectedness of a literate adult population and its prior educational experiences.

Because early educational reform efforts focused on college-bound youth, little attention was given to the need for improving school-to-work transitions of noncollege-bound youth. However, recent reports such as *The Forgotten Half* (William T. Grant Foundation 1988) and *America's Choice* (National Center on Education and the Economy 1990) stress the need to "overcome the disconnection between education and work" (National Governors' Association 1990, preface). This renewed emphasis on the school-to-work transition has been prompted by such factors as changing demographics, the need for a more productive and competitive work force, and concern about the economic well-being of many youth.

According to the National Governors' Association (1990), "in the past it was possible to tolerate . . . a haphazard approach to school-to-work transition . . . [b]ut today the waste in human potential that results no longer can be afforded" (p. 22). Programs that connect youth in school with the world of work are sorely needed to give young people both knowledge of work and knowledge of themselves (William T. Grant Foundation 1988).

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What Is the Current Status of Business Involvement?

During the past decade business involvement with schools has increased, and, as a result, progress has been made toward achieving the objective of business involvement in strengthening the connection between education and work (Mikulecky 1990). Results of a *Fortune* magazine survey support this statement. Of the 305 *Fortune* 500 and Service 500 companies responding to the survey, all but seven (2 percent) reported they were doing something for education (Kuhn 1990). Companies responding affirmatively to the survey were involved in the following activities to help public education: contributing money, 78 percent; offering students summer or part-time jobs, 76 percent; contributing materials or equipment, 64 percent; encouraging employees to run for school boards, 59 percent; participating in school partnerships, 48 percent; offering teachers summer jobs, 26 percent; lobbying legislatures for reform, 22 percent; supporting tax increases or bond issues, 18 percent; and loaning executives to schools, 12 percent.

Although it is true that more businesses are helping public education, many of the activities listed here do not contribute directly to strengthening the linkages between education and work. In some communities, however, business leaders are entering into a new form of collaboration, known as work-education partnerships, that focus on educational reform and on strengthening the links between education and the workplace for economically disadvantaged youth. Much more complex and sophisticated than traditional school-business partnerships such as Adopt-a-School programs, these work-education partnerships are designed to bring about substantive change in the existing system by changing the nature of school-business partnerships (Lacey and Kingsley 1988).

Both the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (Lacey and Kingsley 1988; Lefkowitz, Kingsley, and Hahn 1987) and the National Alliance of Business (NAB) (1989) have been involved in fostering work-education partnerships in a number of cities throughout the country. Designed to bring an array of public and private resources to bear on the transition from school to work, both the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the NAB projects sought to form and sustain alliances among groups of employers rather than individual firms, school systems rather than single schools, and combinations of governmental and private funding rather than a single source. The experiences of these projects provide valuable lessons to businesses wishing to strengthen the relationship between education and work.

What Constitutes Effective Work-Education Partnerships?

By their very nature, work-education partnerships vary. They take place in different communities under unique circumstances, involving distinctive sets of key players. Nevertheless, an examination of the reports by Lacey and Kingsley (1988) and NAB (1989) reveals that effective partnerships share a number of common elements:

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- **Brokering**. An intermediary or "broker" is crucial for developing links among all the players in a successful work-education partnership. In order for brokers to facilitate cross-sector collaboration, they must be able to operate in several contexts. Brokers help translate differences in terminology, context, and cultures and help create a sense of common ownership among the key players. Once established, the broker or intermediary may become responsible for governance of the partnership.

- **Involving the Right Players**. Partnerships achieve their maximum potential when the right mix of people from many organizations are involved. A core group of high-level leaders from the various sectors who endorse the mission of the partnership and agree to share the risks and benefits equally is essential for success.

- **Ensuring Commitment**. Commitment to the partnership is fostered by developing a sense of ownership among the various organizations. The commitment must be long term, sustained, and emerge from all sectors involved in the partnership. Top-level leaders should understand that there are no "quick fixes" and must be willing to assign time, money, and human resources to the partnership effort.

- **Developing a Formal Plan**. Formal plans that include both long- and short-term goals, measurable objectives, concrete tasks, and specifications defining who is responsible for what and by what date provide a foundation for successful partnerships. Goals serve as an incentive and as a means for measuring accountability. In addition, a collaborative process for arriving at goals and objectives can ensure consensus and expand ownership of the project. The best plans include an obvious chain of command, are signed by all top leaders, and are publicized.

- **Implementing the Plan**. Establishing an organization to manage the day-to-day operation of the partnership and evaluate its efforts is important. The management role may be assumed by the Private Industry Council, the local Chamber of Commerce or by an organization created especially for the purpose of managing the partnership. The management function may emerge from the initial brokering efforts of an intermediary organization.

- **Maintaining the Partnership**. Partnerships need to be cultivated and maintained. Time and effort should be devoted to preparing for the inevitable changes that will result over the life of a partnership. For example, evaluation results will undoubtedly require changes in procedures. Original partners may withdraw and new ones may be recruited to take their place. Throughout its life, the partnership must be nurtured and sustained in order to maintain its vitality.

What Next?

By the year 2000, will every U.S. business be involved in strengthening the connection between education and work? Certainly the results of the *Fortune* survey (Kuhn 1990) are encouraging because they indicate that business is involved with public education in a variety of ways. The challenge now is to channel this involvement into the development of the type of work-education partnerships fostered by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the National Alliance of Business. However, for these partnerships to be successful, business must increase its understanding of the type of educational reform required--that which facilitates and enhances school-to-work transition.

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